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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 002141

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2016

TAGS: PGOV PTER SNAR CO

SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN ELECTIONS: THE VIEW FROM VALLE DEL CAUCA

REF: BOGOTA 2030

Classified By: DCM Milton K. Drucker;

Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

¶11. (C) Poloffs' contacts in Valle del Cauca predicted during March 2-3 meetings the Liberals would win more congressional seats on March 12 than other parties in the Department, but said Uribista parties combined would win nationwide. They also expected President Uribe to carry the department in May, but stressed that support for the President from Valle del Cauca's poor depends on Uribe publicly committing to invest more in social programs. The security situation in the department has improved, but the FARC, AUC, and North Valle cartel remain active in the region. Most agreed that the recently signed U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) will pay dividends in Valle del Cauca, a major sugar and ethanol producer, but that the GOC needs to educate the public on FTA benefits. A recall movement may remove the mayor of Cali from office this summer. The mayor, who has improved long-neglected city management, made significant political missteps early in his administration, but is fighting to rectify these errors. End Summary.

Valle Del Cauca: Land of Sugar and Cartels

¶12. (C) Poloffs met with congressional candidates, the governor, the mayor, city council members and civil society groups in a March 2-3 visit to Cali, Valle del Cauca's capital and Colombia's third largest city. Valle del Cauca is the agricultural heart of southwest Colombia. Most Colombian sugar is produced here and can be harvested year round. Other major crops include maize, cotton, tobacco, and coffee. Cali is home to more than half of Valle del Cauca's population, ethnically diverse as a result of Spanish slave importation to work the sugarcane plantations. In the 1990s, Cali was a major cocaine trafficking center. The Cali cartel has been largely dismantled, but the North Valle cartel remains active.

Congressional Elections: Liberals to Win in Valle?

¶13. (C) Cali and Valle del Cauca have traditionally voted Liberal and most of our interlocutors (from various parties) said they expected Valle del Cauca will elect more Liberal Party candidates to the House and Senate than candidates from

other parties, but predicted pro-Uribe parties would win nationwide. (Interestingly, the numbers from the 2002 Congressional elections suggest that Valle has been quite evenly divided in recent years: Conservative candidates won seven seats in the House, while Liberal candidates won only five seats. The Liberals have a small Valle del Cauca majority in the Senate.)

Uribe Likely to Carry Valle in May

¶4. (C) President Uribe is widely expected to carry Valle del Cauca in the May elections. His support is strongest among the middle and upper classes - those who feel they have benefited most from his Democratic Security policy. Uribe's support among Valle del Cauca's poor is less certain. City councilwoman and Liberal party member Clementina Velez Galvez (who wants to run for mayor of Cali) said she was a strong Uribe supporter and had been attempting to drum up support for him in the lower social stratas. She said Uribe could lose these votes, which are substantial, unless he commits before the presidential elections to increased investment in social programs in his second term.

¶5. (C) While support for Uribe is strong, many acknowledged he could face more of a contest in Valle if Rafael Pardo wins the Liberal Party nomination. Many predicted Uribe would win handily in the first round if the Liberal candidate were Horacio Serpa, but were less certain if it were Pardo. Pardo is popular in Valle, regarded as very intelligent, a tough debater, and strong on "peace" issues as a former Defense Minister. Serpa, on the other hand, has not caught fire. Opinions on who would win the nomination were mixed; some said Serpa would definitely win, others expected a "photo finish" between Serpa and Pardo. One Liberal Party House member running for the Senate, Griselda Janeth Restrepo, said Liberal primary candidate Rodrigo Rivera was the Liberals' "man of the future." (See septel on Polcouns' recent meeting with Rivera.)

Security: Cali Generally Safe but FARC Threatens Candidates

¶6. (C) Despite the presence of both Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and United Self-Defense (AUC) paramilitary fronts in Valle del Cauca, Cali residents say they feel generally safe in the city. While soldiers are regular sights on the streets of Bogota, poloffs did not see one in Cali. Deputy DAS (FBI equivalent) Director Eduardo Fernandez proclaimed Cali relatively safe, but said the FARC, AUC, and narcotraffickers are using remote waterways to move goods and people between the Pacific coast and the Colombian interior. He said there continues to be FARC activity in the mountainous area that forms the border of Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Tolima Departments and into Huila and Meta Departments.

¶7. (C) Fernandez said he had no particular security concerns for the March 12 elections. Two of the candidates poloffs met with, however, said they were threatened by the FARC in recent weeks. Liberal Representative and Senate candidate Griselda Janeth Restrepo said she learned of a potential FARC attack prior to a campaign visit to a small town outside of Cali. She canceled her trip and has increased her security detail from one guard to two. Conservative Representative and candidate Santiago Castro learned of a FARC threat before visiting the town of Florida two Sundays ago. Castro, whose uncle was kidnapped and murdered by the FARC, also has increased his security detail. Despite these threats, both candidates insisted they feel relatively safe in Cali. Governor Garzon and others also noted that three of the four campaign-related murders in Valle del Cauca since the beginning of January are attributed to narcotraffickers.

Cartel Still Active, May Influence Elections

¶18. (C) A universal concern is the continuing presence and strength of the North Valle cartel. According to Cali Mayor Apolinar Salcedo, cartel members are routinely in Cali to do "business." He also said the cartel has ties to FARC fronts located in coastal Valle del Cauca. City councilwoman Clementina Velez urged the U.S. to keep its attention focused on the North Valle cartel. Velez claimed that the cartel was buying congressional candidates, who in turn were buying city council members. Velez, who did not name names, but who implied that the mayor and many other members of the city council were on narco payrolls, said the large amount of cash used by some candidates is evidence of links to narcotraffickers. She also said the North Valle cartel had two goals in buying candidates: to create an anti-extradition majority in Congress and to ensure political control of the department. Representative Castro, on the other hand, said it was unlikely Congress would ever vote to end extradition.

FTA: Good for Valle, Needs Better Press

¶19. (C) Local and national government officials in Valle across the political spectrum support the FTA agreed between Colombia and the U.S. at the end of February. Even Governor Garzon, a member of anti-FTA Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA), made positive noises about the FTA. Garzon, a moderate leftist, agreed that as a major producer of sugar and ethanol and the home of several pharmaceutical manufacturers, Valle del Cauca would benefit from the FTA. There is already investment in expanding the port in the Pacific coast town of Buenaventura, from which goods can be shipped directly to California. Garzon said that smaller businesses and the public in general need to be better educated about the FTA's benefits (reftel). Representative Castro said his party would only be in favor of short-term subsidies aimed at retraining FTA "losers". Switching from Spanish to English, he said, "once you start subsidies, they are hard to stop."

Cali's Mayor: Under Siege, but Fighting Back

¶110. (C) Cali Mayor Apolinar Salcedo may be forced from office before the 2007 local elections. Congressional candidates, city council members, and civil society groups complained to poloffs about the mayor's alleged mismanagement. Many implied that the mayor, who is blind since a shooting accident when he was 7 years old, was being duped by his team of advisors. PDA Congresswoman Margarita Londono is collecting signatures to force a recall vote at the end of May. Castro, who supports the recall movement, said Londono has collected more than twice the number of required signatures.

¶111. (C) Salcedo told poloffs during a lunch meeting that he made many mistakes during his election campaign, including with his first cabinet. Salcedo, who is Afro-Colombian, said he allowed the race to be painted as a battle for poor blacks to take over the city from rich whites. He then erred by failing to reach out to the defeated elites (including the local newspaper, which has been unremittingly hostile, in part because Salcedo defeated the paper's part-owner in the mayoral race), and damaged himself further by poor management decisions, including by giving too much autonomy to heads of municipal agencies, giving the impression that he had lost control. He said he has begun to reverse the mistakes, including by dismissing his entire cabinet in late 2005 and appointing "elite" figures to manage key issues. Salcedo also is widely criticized for privatizing the collection of municipal taxes and awarding other contracts to private firms. Poloffs visited the new tax collection center, which is a modern facility unlike other Colombian government facilities and would not be out of place in the United States. According to the mayor's staff, the privatized system is cheaper and more efficient - and tax collection

rates are up.
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